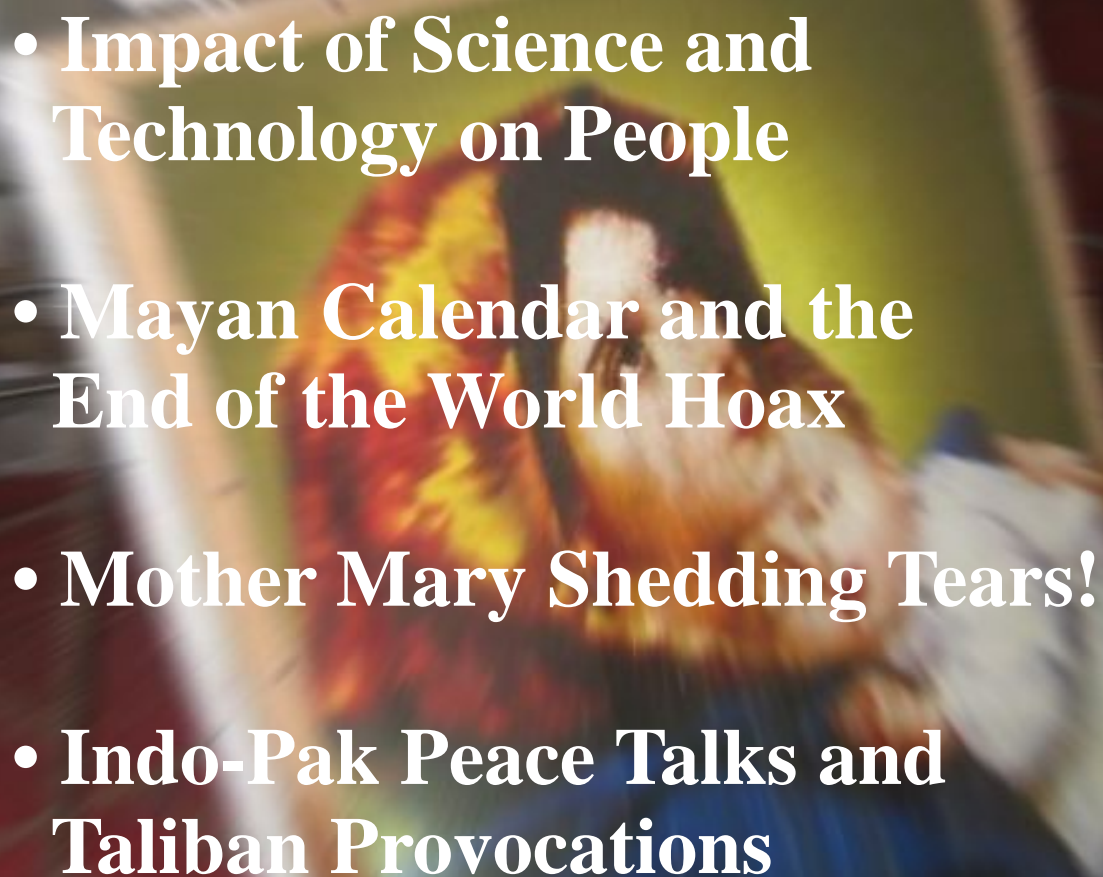


# INDIAN SKEPTIC

No. 01/03

March 2010

- 
- **Impact of Science and Technology on People**
  - **Mayan Calendar and the End of the World Hoax**
  - **Mother Mary Shedding Tears!**
  - **Indo-Pak Peace Talks and Taliban Provocations**

# INDIAN SKEPTIC

No. 01/03

March 2010

editor & publisher

manoj

*Indian Skeptic* is an e-magazine and is mailed free with the hope that it would be useful to the recipients. If anybody is not interested in receiving this magazine, please inform us.

The views expressed in the articles are that of the respective authors' and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of *Indian Skeptic*

To view *Indian Skeptic* correctly, the reader requires Adobe Reader 8.0 or its later versions or any other compatible PDF readers. The latest version of Adobe PDF Reader can be downloaded free from their website: <http://www.adobe.com/>

Articles, letters, and other communications may be emailed to

[bskeptic@gmail.com](mailto:bskeptic@gmail.com)

*It shall be the duty  
of every citizen of  
India -*

*to develop the  
scientific temper,  
humanism and the  
spirit of inquiry and  
reform*

*(Article 51A (h) Part IVA -  
Fundamental Duties,  
Constitution of India)*

---

## Guns or Butter: Impact of Science and Technology

Anur R Puniyani

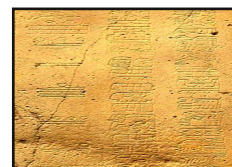


Page 04

---

## Mayan Calendar and the End of the World Hoax

Saurabh Garg



Page 09

---

## Atheist Eve

Tracie Harris



Page 13

---

## Mother Mary Shedding Tears!

Narendra Nayak



Page 14

---

## Indo-Pak Peace Talks and Taliban Provocations

Ram Puniyani



Page 18

---

## From the President of FIRA

Narendra Nayak



Page 21

---

## Tools for Skeptical Thinking

Carl Sagan



Page 24

# Guns or Butter

## Impact of Science and Technology on People

Anur R Puniyani

How does one try to understand science and technology and the impact that it has on our lives? Well, one can start by trying to think about what all one has done during the day and imagine whether it would have been possible had Newton not formulated the three laws, or if Galileo hadn't been ingenious enough to think of his machines, or if Benjamin Franklin had not discovered electricity or if Anur R Puniyani had not discovered the effect of fire on lead pencils or that some scientific crusader or the other had not contributed in some way or the other to this continuing saga of the breathtaking power of combined human intellect. Ok I am sorry about the last one, I was just expressing a long held fantasy of mine, to be counted among the great minds of Science. And that was actually an experiment that I did as a child, sacrificing one of my dear lead pencils to Agni, the Hindu God of fire. Coming back to the point, I don't think it should be difficult to imagine how deep our kinship with science and technology has grown to be over the past three hundred odd years or so, but just in case you have come to take science and technology so much for granted that you don't seem to take note of its presence the following might just make you let go off the feeling.

So, what have you done during the day? Did you travel by a vehicle to get to some place? Would that have been possible had the laws of thermodynamics not been discovered by a certain gentleman called Sadi Carnot and used to make combustion engines? Or would it have been possible had the science of geology not played a

a part in the unearthing of fuel reserves, fuel from which, must have directly or indirectly powered your vehicle? Or would it have been possible without the science of chemistry and chemical engineering not playing a part in refining of the extracted fuel? Or would it have been possible had the discipline of mechanical engineering not played a part in the development of heavy machinery with which the vehicle you travelled in was manufactured? Think of any other activity that you did and see how large a role must science have had to play in it.

A notable development in our modern times has been that when India has been milking the benefits of technology, a completely antithetical trend of obscurantism is emerging as never before in the country. Things like *Rieki*, *Feng-shui*, *Vastu* which are not based on logical foundations are enjoying a popularity that they never before enjoyed.

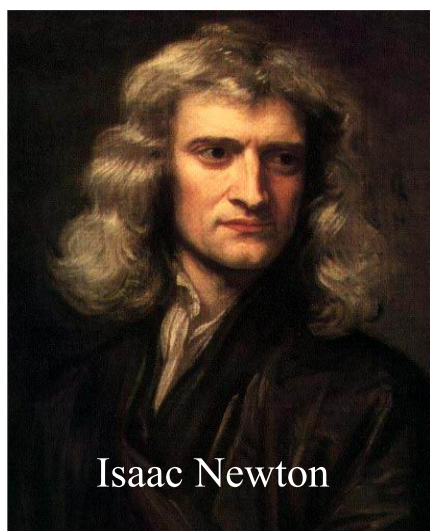


That was just a small example showing the inextricable interwovenness of science with our everyday lives. We find today that science is present in every move that we make in every breath that we take, in every rule that we break and in every cake that we bake. So it's pertinent to stop and look back to understand the social implications of this behemoth of an institution called science so that we are in more control of it.

Let's look at the present state of science and technology to begin with. Today we find ourselves in the middle of a second industrial revolution of sorts, the IT revolution which is creating a paradigm shift in the way information is handled and

to the king again. The entourage left again and after six months reached the king's country only to find the whole country immersed in celebrations of the king's marriage. Understandably, impatient as kings are, he could not wait so long to marry and married a princess from a nearby country.

Today we are in an era where Princesses/Princes from one part of the world are finding their Queens/Kings in some other part of the world, not caring about how many oceans separate them, using that magical thing that we call the internet, sending and receiving a gazillion messages to and from them before getting



Isaac Newton

During Renaissance, the great minds like Galileo, Copernicus, Newton and later Darwin et al. challenged the way Religion tried to paint a picture of the world. Their basic foundation was a framework of observation, logic and experimentation. It is the very same method of logic that acts as the foundation on which the entire structure of computer science and engineering stands today.

used all over the world. I am sure our ancestors would never have imagined how highly advanced the ways of handling information would become in future.

Just to put things in perspective let me narrate a story to you that I read as a child about a king in the 16th century who was to be married to a princess who lived in a far away country that was separated by an ocean. The princess fell ill and the marriage had to be postponed, so an entourage left from the princess' country to give this message to the king and reached there after about six months. When the entourage returned to the princess' country after another six months war had broken out there and this message had to be conveyed

married to them in a jiffy. Now that is information technology for you.

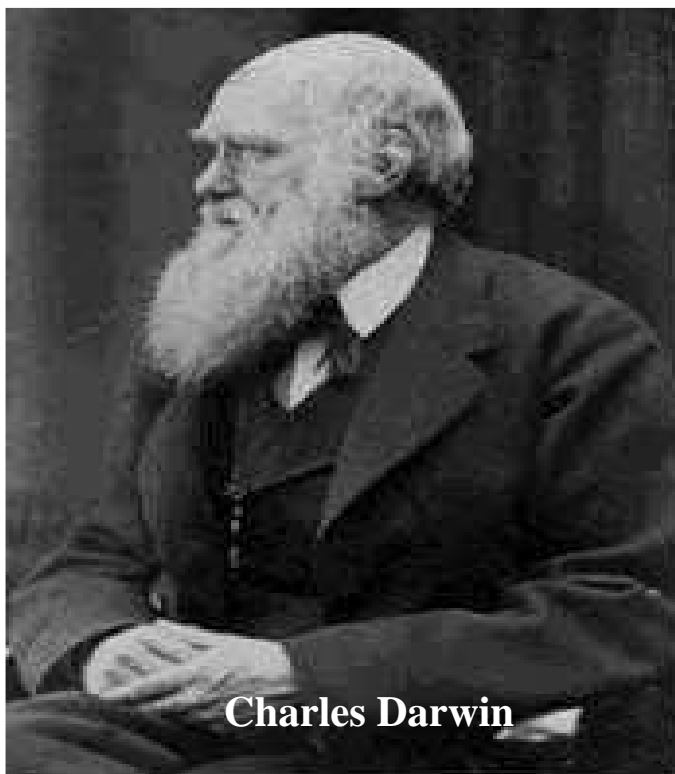
Information Technology is also taking new strides in the field of mobile communication. There was a time in India when Indira Gandhi, former prime minister of our country based her election campaign on the idea of providing food, clothing and shelter to all in India. Let me just reiterate something that has become a cliché' by now by saying that elections will very soon probably be fought on the slogan of food, clothing, shelter and mobiles for all. Today all you need to stay accessible and connected 24/7 is a mobile handset which may cost you as less as Rs. 2000 and a connection that costs not more than Rs. 200

per month so the idea of a mobile for everyone is not really that far off. One more indicator of technology revolutionizing our lives.

But I think the most important way in which technology has influenced our society is in the way in which enterprises function today. Quoting from a speech by Mr. Nandan Nilekani, CEO, Infosys, one of India's largest IT enterprises, 'the world is becoming flatter'. This in effect means that for almost all practical purposes of any enterprise (especially west based) the boundaries between different countries are mere lines on a piece of paper and that's it.

Today production and business processes are being outsourced en masse from Europe and America to countries where human resource is cheaper, the whole process being aided by IT. A company manufacturing vehicles for example is getting the engines manufactured in one part of the world, the gearbox in another and the parts of the body in yet another where the cost of labor is lesser. Similarly back office operations of many enterprises are being outsourced to third world countries where human resource is cheap, for example a credit card company in the US might have its customer care being handled from a third world country like India. This has given entrepreneurs a great amount of flexibility in planning their production and business processes so that their profits are maximized.

A concomitant of this development is that competition has become cut-throat between entrepreneurs of the third world to whom production or business processes are outsourced as they live in the constant feeling of insecurity that if they don't provide better services and products at cheaper rates they will lose business to some other competitor who may be in some other part of the world. Because of this, those in production, try to cut-costs by hiring cheap labor or outsourcing production further to small units where labourers are hired at cheap rates.



Conditions are better when it comes to people working in firms in the IT and ITE (IT-Enabled) sector but this too has its own problems. As far as monetary gains to employees are concerned there is probably no other sector that even comes close to the IT and ITES sector because they are paid by west based enterprises or enterprises having west based clients. So even if a person working in IT or ITES in India gets the salary of an American blue collar labourer like a cleaner in McDonalds for example, whose salary may be something like a thousand dollars a month, s/he feels more than happy with the pay package. This is so because the thousand dollars gets converted to forty five thousand rupees when it comes to India thanks to the currency conversion rates tipped heavily in favour of the United States. This is not to denigrate anyone working in the IT and ITES sector in India or any other third world country but just to bring out the unevenness of the whole system. Also just like in the production sector, the entrepreneurs in the IT and ITES sector also face intense competition giving them a constant feeling of insecurity which they pass on to their human resource making their lives tough. The situation is like that of a prom night in an American high school where every boy wants to be

with the prom queen who gets the best deal because she gets to choose which boy she wants to be with, whereas everyone else is willing to do anything for her and losing out in the deal due to heavy competition.

The money saved on Human resource through the process of outsourcing then, directly goes into the pockets of the west based entrepreneur who comes out as the biggest beneficiary in the whole process.

I would say it's a different version of what happened three hundred odd years ago when the colonial powers conquered the rest of the world in search of markets and raw material to fill the pockets of their governments and their enterprises.

The real losers as we can see in this whole era of IT and ITES are the blue collar workers who are being shoved further into the throes of poverty whereas at the very same time we see that the bigger entrepreneurs of the west are reaping in the benefits.

Another notable development in our modern times has been that when India has been milking the benefits of technology, a completely antithetical trend of obscurantism is emerging as never before in the country. Things like Rieki, Feng-shui, Vastu which are not based on logical foundations are enjoying a popularity that they never before enjoyed. The use of technology has brought more insecurity in the lives of the people especially the software engineers, the vanguard of today's IT revolution what with hire and fire being the order of the day. The processes of privatization and opening up of Indian markets to global players has had a similar effect on other sectors like production also and people in these sectors also have to deal with a lot of stress and insecurity. In such a situation anything that gives them a sense of predictability about the future comes as a welcome relief, hence the explosion of blind faith in the country.

emerged first in a way as we know it today in the era called the Renaissance, it directly challenged all religious dogma and blind faith. The great minds of science like Galileo, Copernicus, Newton and later Darwin et al. challenged the way Religion tried to paint a picture of the world. Their basic foundation was a framework of observation, logic and experimentation. It is worth a mention here that it is the very same method of logic that acts as the foundation on which the entire structure of computer science and engineering stands and which is a core aspect of today's IT industry and the driver of the new economy.

TV channels across the country today are beaming programs about things like Reiki, Feng shui etc. and there are all sorts of people who claim to know what the future holds in store for us. Highly stressed out people go to such fortune-tellers to know their future, whether they will get a raise, whether they will get a better job, when will they fly to the US etc. These very people forget that the real problem is not about what will happen in the future but what is happening in the present. What is happening is a large group of people have to live with a feeling of insecurity which arises because of a trickle down effect of global cut-throat competition and which represents a system of unequal exchange of mainly two types - first, between large and small entrepreneurs and second, the entrepreneurs and their Human resource.

But all said and done, technology has also positively changed our lives in many ways, at least the lives of all those who have crossed a certain threshold in terms of educational achievement and financial security. Today we find innumerable cases of people who lived their entire life in poverty and material deprivation now leading very materially satisfying lives. In short, IT in India has given a lot of hope to the hopeless but also given insecurity to the carefree.

It may be noted here that when Science To conclude let us remind ourselves of the



analogy that science has with a knife. In the same way as a knife is inherently neither good nor bad, since it becomes something good when used for productive purposes and bad when used to harm someone, science is also neither good nor bad since it can become good when used to make life simpler for people and bad when used for destructive purposes like making nuclear bombs or helping in increasing inequalities by playing into the hands of the select few.

neutral but powerful thing that it is, we have to make a conscious decision as to how science has to be used by us as a society, for making guns or for producing butter and to that I would add the choice of whether to use it to create more value for a select few or to make life simpler and easier for all and usher in a more happy, content and also materially satisfied society.

**BS**

History tells us that till today the bad uses of science have probably been as much if not more than the good ones which leaves us with a thought that science being such a

*Anur R Puniyani a Game  
programmer from Bangalore*

**If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning, concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.**

**David Hume**

*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748)*



December 21, 2012

## Mayan Calendar and the *End of the World* Hoax

Saurabh Garg

*"Half a truth is often a great lie" -  
Benjamin Franklin*

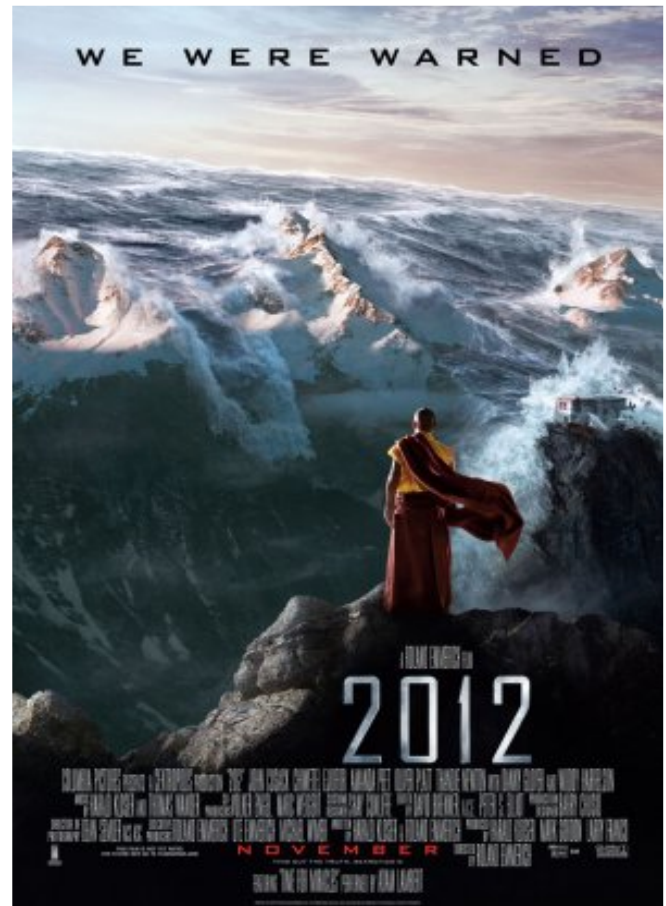
This article intends to expose the hype around the Mayan Calendar and the End of the World hoax. The movie 2012, the sensational media which has no agenda other than increasing their TRP, the camera friendly attention grabbing “experts” and an uncritical audience together contributed to this hoax of the *End of the World in 2012*. Let us now dissect the myths:

**Myth 1: The Mayan calendar predicts that the earth will end on December 21, 2012**

Mayan civilization was great at designing astronomical calendars. They had 17 calendars. Thousands of years ago they managed to calculate the length of the lunar moon as 329.53020 days, which has only 34 seconds error. The Mayan Long Count calendar ends on 21 December 2012.

**Truth:** The Mayan Long Count Calendar doesn't end on 21 December 2012. It is the end of one cycle, before a new cycle begins. Also, accurate lunar cycle calculations do not necessarily qualify them to be best doomsday predictor. In that case, they could have developed some better techniques to save their own civilization from destruction.

One may here remember the Y2K problem and the doomsday predictions. It was just an error of assigning just 2 digits for years. The same problem will happen on 31 December 9999. We will need to add more digits for year field. The point here is that



there was lack of foresight.

**Myth 2: Sun storms will destroy ozone layer and all life on earth.**

Solar experts know that the energy output of the sun is cyclic. However, recent solar storms have been bombarding the earth with lot of radiation energy. It's been knocking out power grids and destroying satellites. This activity is predicted to get worse and calculations suggest it will reach its deadly peak sometime in 2012.

**Truth:** NASA acknowledges that the 2012 sunspot cycle will be 30% to 50%

stronger. If correct, the years ahead could produce a burst of solar activity second only to the historic Solar Max of 1958. Please note it will be less than not more than what happened in 1958 and earlier too. Old magnetic fields swept up then should re-appear as big sunspots in 2010-2011.

Life on earth was supposed to end in summer 2009 due to radiation bombardment! As you don't think of us as zombies or something, the myth has already bitten dust.

### **Myth 3: *The Bible says it.***

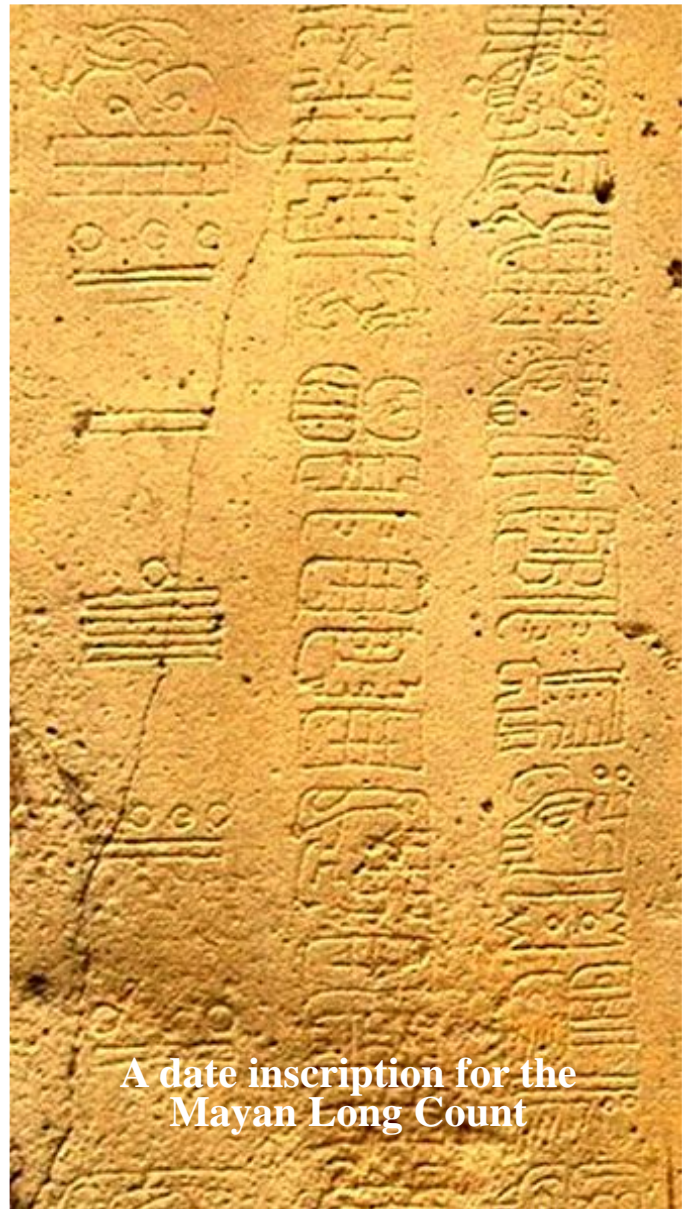
Interpretations of the Christian Bible reveal that the date for Armageddon, the final battle between good and devil, has been set for 2012. When we study The Book of Revelation and Bible prophecy, we realize that comet impact will happen and plays a major role in events during the Great Tribulation.

**Truth:** Do you even want me to explain this. These people have to first write a Bible which is not self-contradictory. Comet Impact is covered in detail in Myth 5.

### **Myth 4: *Yellowstone Super-volcano will destroy the human life.***

Yellowstone National Park in United States is famous for its thermal springs and old faithful geyser. The reason for this is simple – it is sitting on top of the world's biggest volcano and geological experts are beginning to get nervous sweats. The Yellowstone volcano has a pattern of erupting every 650,000 years or so, and we're many years overdue for an explosion that will fill the atmosphere with ash, blocking the sun and plunging the earth into a frozen winter that could last up to 15,000 years. The pressure under the Yellowstone is building steadily, and geologists have set 2012 as a likely date for the big bang.

**Truth:** The Internet is the biggest source of misinformation about Yellowstone's volcanic past and present. Geologists are



taking frequent observations for it. And as per their views no such eruption is likely to occur in 2012 (Source: [http://www.agiweb.org/geotimes/june05/feature\\_supervolcano.html](http://www.agiweb.org/geotimes/june05/feature_supervolcano.html))

### **Myth 5: *NASA says comet will strike in 2012***

In Feb 2004, NASA announced that the 10th planet, "Planet X" is real and is a comet planet. They named this comet SEDNA and claim it will safely pass over 950 million miles from earth. Yet on 12 JAN 2005, NASA launched "Deep Impact" a comet buster satellite that will impact Comet Tempel 1 (a small comet) on JULY 4 2005. NASA hopes to smash a 100 ft deep crater into this comet. More than likely "deep impact" contains a bunker buster,



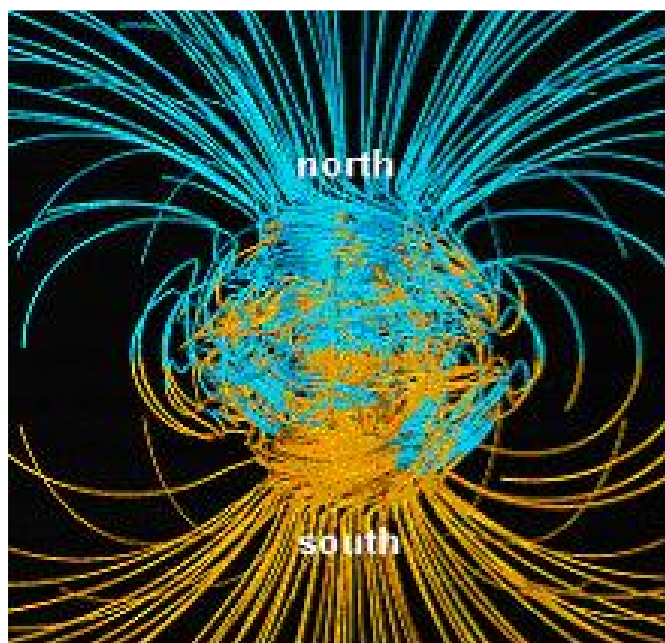
nuclear warhead that will crash deep within the comet and detonate. This is target practice for the doomsday comet in 2012 CE? Physicists at Berkeley University have been crunching the numbers. They've determined that the earth is well overdue for a major catastrophic event. Even worse, they're claiming that their calculations prove that we're all going to die, very soon. They are also saying that their prediction comes with a certainty of 99 per cent; and 2012 just happens to be the best guess as to when it occurs.

**Truth:** At Berkeley University website I did not find any information about comet impact but I found a lot of information about admission for 2012 classes. In reality, comet impact is a real possibility but you cannot say whether it will happen in particular year, decade, century or millennium. Objects with diameters of 5-10m impact the Earth's atmosphere approximately once per year, with as much energy as the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, approximately 15 kilotonnes of TNT. These ordinarily explode in the upper atmosphere, and most or all of the solids are vaporized. Objects of diameters of the order of 50 meters strike the Earth

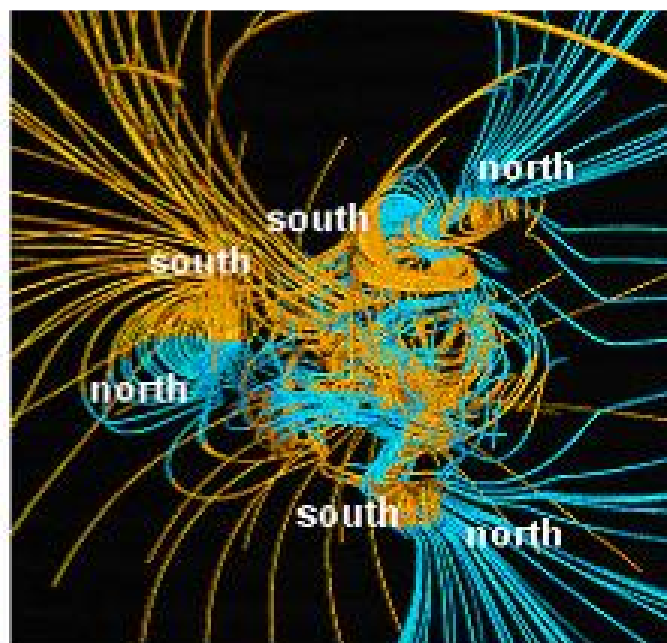
approximately once every thousand year. Objects with a diameter of one kilometer hit the Earth an average of twice every million year interval. Large collisions with five kilometer objects happen approximately once every ten million years. The only information for people who like to get terrified is about asteroid (99942) Apophis. It broke the record for the highest level on the Torino Scale for a short time achieving level 4. As of October 7, 2009, the impact probability for April 13, 2036, is calculated as 1 in 250,000. An additional impact date in 2037 was also identified; the impact probability for that encounter is calculated as 1 in 12.3 million. So no impact in the year 2012 is anticipated.

#### **Myth 6: *Earth's magnetic field change or Pole Shifting.***

We all know the Earth is surrounded by a magnetic field that shields us from most of the sun's radiation. What you might not know is that the magnetic poles we call North and South have a nasty habit of swapping places every 750,000 years or so - - and right now we're about 30,000 years overdue. Scientists have noted that the



**between reversals**



**during a reversal**

poles are drifting apart roughly 20-30 kms each year, much faster than ever before, which points to a pole-shift being right around the corner. While the pole shift is under way, the magnetic field is disrupted and will eventually disappear, sometimes for up to 100 years. The result is enough UV outdoors to crisp your skin in seconds, killing everything it touches.

**Truth:** During Magnetic Flip Magnetic field does not vanish and reversals take a few thousand years to complete. It just gets more complicated. Magnetic lines of force near Earth's surface become twisted and tangled, and magnetic poles pop up in unaccustomed places. A south magnetic pole might emerge over Africa, for instance, or a north pole over Tahiti. Weird. But it is still a planetary magnetic field, and it still protects us from space radiation and solar storms. I have taken the details from NASA article.

### **Myth 7: *Physicists confirms the end of the world in 2012***

Some physicists from Berkeley University acknowledged that the earth will end in 2012. They used mathematics to calculate the end of humans.

**Truth:** A complete hoax with no names mentioned; although some websites make claim of 99% probability of the doomsday by these non-existent physicists. University of Berkeley is still recruiting students; so if they think world is going to end they are not showing it.

**BS**

***Saurabh Garg is based in Delhi and runs a Computer Networking Firm***

**If it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he's evil. But the worst that you can say about him is that basically he's an underachiever.**

**Woody Allen**

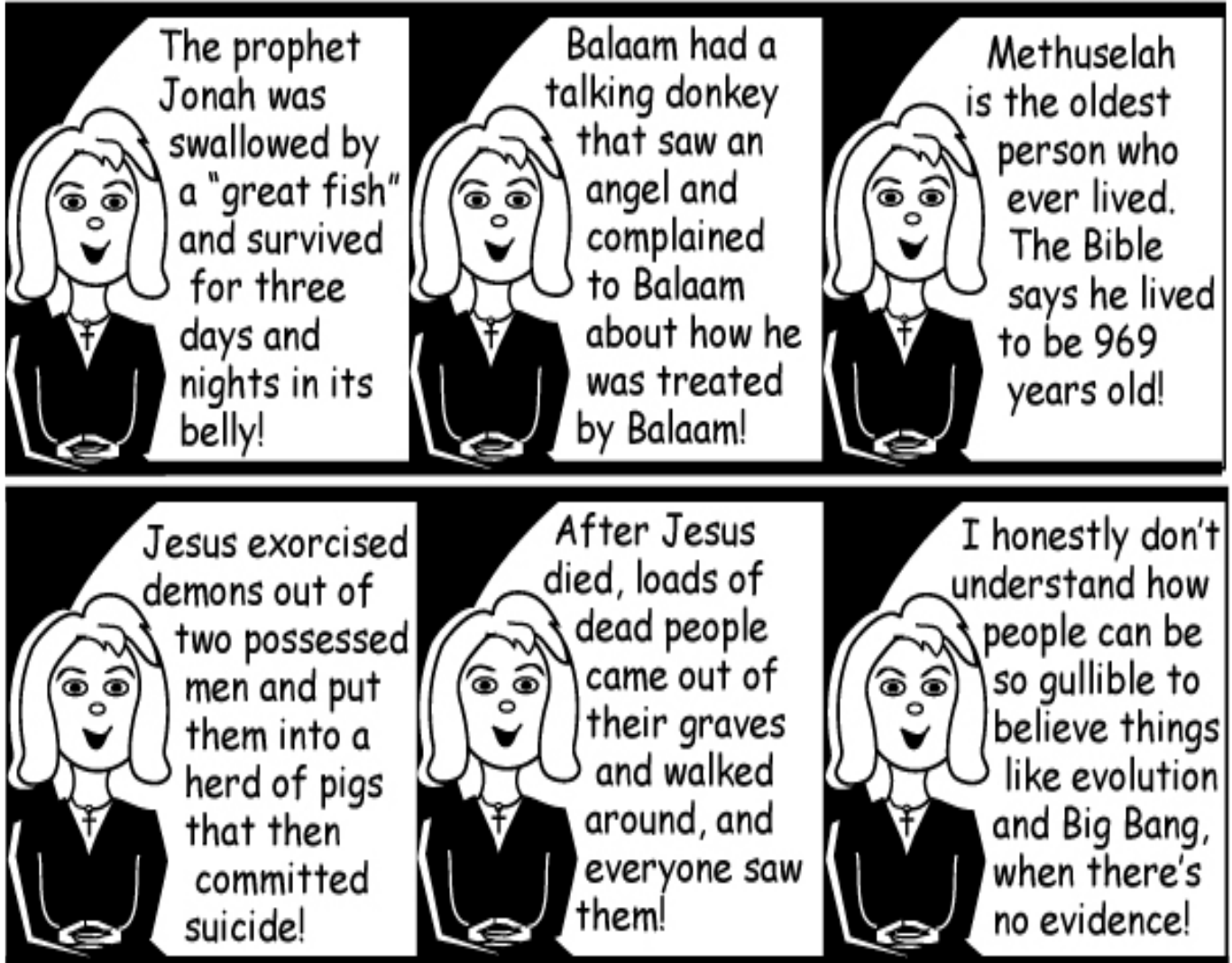
*Love and Death (1975 film)*



## Unbelievable!

ATHEIST EVE

TH DESIGN ©2010



Tracie Harris is a graphic designer in Austin, Texas, US. According to the website, <http://www.atheist-community.org/>, "her long, slow recovery from a rabid fundamentalist upbringing led her to the creation of *Atheist Eve*".

Tracie Harris has been publishing *Atheist Eve* since 1 October 2004 and all her earlier works are archived at: <http://www.atheist-community.org/atheisteve/>. *Atheist Eve* is reproduced by *Indian Skeptic* with the author's permission.

©Tracie Harris

# Mother Mary Shedding Tears!

Narendra Nayak

This report is about an allegedly paranormal phenomenon reported in media. The report is the result of the visit of a team of rationalists to the place where the alleged 'miracle' that has been taking place. It is an attempt to investigate happenings under the section 51 AH of the constitution of India which outlines the duties of a citizen. It is not an attempt to hurt any ones religious sentiments or cause any friction between any groups belonging to the same or different religions. The team consisted of office bearers of Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations and Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham.

After the statues of Mary shedding tears and blood it is the turn of flex prints now! In the St.Mary's Jacobite Chapel, Kattachira flex prints of Mary with Infant Jesus have started discharging a liquid which is oily and has an aromatic smell. On the 6th March some of us had the opportunity to visit the place after our request was acceded to by Mathew Theodosios Metropolitan of the Kollam Diocese under which the chapel is located. It may be recalled that this so called miracle had hit the headlines in a section of the media in Kerala from October,2009. On reaching the place we were taken for a meeting with the cor episcopal Abraham Mannikarottu, his group of priests and devotees where there were heated debates about the Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham's campaign,matters of faith and various such issues. Finally at around 12.30 we were taken around the place by the cor episcopal and his group.What happened is as follows in the form of a statment issued to him. Our opinions are expressed separately.



The image of Mother Mary shedding tears;  
Inset: the vial containing 'tears'



## Relevant points of the statement

We were shown the following:

1. One flex print from which an oily liquid was allegedly flowing out from the side on which the photograph is printed. We have observed the drops of liquid on the photograph and some drops allegedly of the same liquid collected in a tray in which the flex print has been placed.

2. Some photographs of the 1 above have been shown to have oily droplets on them supposedly have come out of them. The viscous liquid was also allegedly flowing out of the book of holy words(verse) kept on the altar.

3. We were also shown vials of the liquid by the cor episcopal Abraham and also allowed to smell them. The odour was that of aromatic oil.

4. We were not allowed to touch any of these objects or collect samples though we were allowed to smell it and take photographs.

We feel that more investigations are needed to establish the source and nature of this liquid. We categorically state that we are not certifying the authenticity of the alleged miracle.

However, we thank the members of the church and Abraham Mannikarottu, cor episcopal for giving us the opportunity to visit the premises and having conducting(-ed) discussions with an open mind.

The church authorities have assured us of full cooperation if any investigations are conducted by govt. authorities in the premises of the church itself in the future.

Narendra Nayak  
President, FIRA.

Well, if that is the statement handed over to the authorities of the church who have permitted us to conduct limited investigations during our visit to the chapel, here are our opinions based on our observations.

Since we were not allowed to wipe the





drops liquid on the photo flex prints to see if they would reappear, it is not possible for us to accept that the liquid was oozing out of them. Since the liquid was supposedly oozing out of the other prints of the same photograph kept in the same premises, it is an attempt to confer some holy status on the premises itself.

Though vials supposedly containing the liquid which has come of these, the word of the church authorities is the only proof of the origin of it. In fact indications are that the flow of the oily liquid is the other way round, from the vials to the flex prints by a human agency! Though the miracle was supposed to be shedding of tears by the photos, it was said to us that it was not tears but some oily liquid probably with the intention of preventing it being proved as not to be tears.

Again, after a prolonged legal battle between the two groups, the Orthodox church has been given possession of the churches and this group Jacobite Syrian Christian Church has now no church in this

area. They are now conducting their worship in this chapel and the house in which the discussions with the cor episcopal were held. It can be also seen that there is a flow of pilgrims to this place and some local shops have opened for business selling trinkets and other items. Since there was a crowd of the members of this church it was very difficult for us to carry out any more investigations. The church authorities were not willing to hand over any samples of the liquid supposedly oozing out of the photos under the suspicion that they could be tampered with. They were also not permitting us to handle the photographs or even touch them. All these give rise to the suspicion that they are trying to hide somethings from us. Though they were co-operative to some extent, they were not forthcoming in allowing to us to conduct more investigations into the nature of this liquid. It seemed to us that the liquid allegedly collected from what oozed out of these photos is going to be commercially exploited.

Since there were repeated statements about



religious sentiments being hurt, we are also having doubts about the same being used to keep us from carrying out further investigations into this alleged miracle.

After these investigations were over, we had a public program outside another church in that area where in we displayed a flex print of Premanand shedding tears and also spoke to the public about various types of superstitions. When this was going on a section of the crowd barged in and tried to disrupt our program and some of them were brandishing copies of the statement mentioned above and were shouting as if that was the proof of us having accepted the miracle as genuine! However they were forced to retreat by our arguments that it was our program and we had the democratic right of expression and also that we never made any claim that

Premanand was shedding tears by the same method as was happening in their chapel. I had to raise my voice at one of the crazed mob who was trying to snatch the print of Premanand's shedding tears. We had to end the program at 7.30 pm as the licence for using the PA system was only upto 7 pm. However, Gopinath continued his miracle exposure program without the PA system and shouting at the top of his voice!

So, there ends another investigation into an alleged paranormal phenomenon! The whole affair seems to be a stage managed show to confer special status on the plot where the chapel is located. The Kerala Yuktivadi Sangham is planning to conduct more investigations into the affair. As far as FIRA is concerned the matter stands closed.

**BS**

**Humanism affirms and reaffirms that the source of all moral values is human need, interest, and experience. Ethics is social, autonomous, and situational needing no divine, religious or ideological sanction. If we do not steal or cheat or lie or commit something immoral it is not because Buddha or Krishna, Jesus or Allah had said it wrong; it is because our experience tells us it is wrong since it is inimical to the interests of the society.**

**H.Narasimhaiah**

*Science, Nonscience and the Paranormal (1987)*

# Indo-Pak Peace Talks and Taliban Provocations

Ram Puniyani

There are reports (February 23, 2010) in Indian media that two Sikhs were killed by Pakistan based Taliban militants in Khyber and Orakzi areas near Peshawar. These Sikhs were part of a group of many Sikhs who had been kidnapped by the Taliban over a month ago. The Taliban had demanded Rs 30 million as ransom for the release of this group and killed two of them after the expiry of the deadline for the payment of the ransom, Jizya. Two persons, Gurvinder Singh and Gurjit Singh amongst others are still believed to be in the custody of the militants.

Some reports suggest that these Sikhs were killed after their refusal to convert to Islam. Indian Government has reacted strongly to this mindless act by Taliban. Many an Indian political groups and a group of Muslim intellectual activists have also condemned this barbaric act in no uncertain terms. The group of Muslim intellectuals/activists in their statement point out, "The inhuman and un-Islamic act of killing innocent civilians has once again exposed the true face of the terrorists whose only aim is to use the name of Islam, the religion of peace and mercy, for their nefarious designs, ulterior motives and worldly pleasures. These are the people who denigrate the name of Islam and bring disrepute to all Muslims of the World. No civilized Muslim would accept the logic of killing innocents in the name of religion. Safeguarding the lives of its minorities from lawlessness, mayhem and protecting their



lives and property is the paramount duty of an Islamic State. The continuous pressure on the Sikh community in Pakistan is alarming and demands urgent attention of civil society, religious leadership and the establishment in Pakistan."

The other aspect of this brutal act is that it is coming just in the wake of the Secretary level talks between India and Pakistan to begin on 25 March 2010. Earlier also there has been a correlation between the improving Pak-India relations and such acts of insanity which put a great amount of pressure on Indian Government to put off the talks. There are numerous such incidents which one recalls. The first such major incident was the Kargil occupation by Pakistan army under Pervez Musharraf in the wake of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Bus Yatra which aimed to break the ice of coldness between the two neighbors. This was done without the knowledge of

Nawaz Sharif, the President.

The second major act had been the Mumbai 26/11, 2008, before which Asif Ali Zardari had been giving positive signals of improving the relations between India and Pakistan. Today one is clear that there are multiple power centers in Pakistan. The democratic Government is trying to establish its writ, but the army and Taliban are doing their best to thwart the return of democracy, democratization process in Pakistan and betterment of Pak-India relations. One must compliment the Indian Government to keep its cool, and firmness in the face of these deliberate provocations. The need to distinguish between the civilian Governments, army-mullah-Taliban complex is mandatory if we want to understand Pakistan today.

From the decades of 1980s multiple processes have gripped Pakistan and these had adverse impact on the whole of South Asia, India in particular. One recalls the rise of Zia Ul Haq with the support of US and Maulanas, led by Maulana Maududi. The formulations of Maulana Maududi

provided ideal foil to the military dictatorship in Pakistan. At the same time US could merrily support Madrassa's which were training Muslim youth as its cannon fodder for its plans to boost anti Soviet forces in Afghanistan, which was occupied by Russian army. Since US army was deeply humiliated due to its defeat in Vietnam, US masterminded to indoctrinate Muslim youth to be trained as terrorists. These were the one's who joined anti Russian forces, which got defeated and since then these Taliban's/Al Qaeda are creating havoc. Not only in India, they have also wrecked the life in Pakistan, several terrorist attacks, one of which killed the Pakistan ex-Prime minister Benazir Bhutto. Today Taliban/Al Qaeda types are like cancer eating into the vitals of Pakistan. Their impact is also felt here in India. Pakistan in a way is caught in a pincer movement, on one hand the Al Qaeda-Taliban creating havoc and on the other Army trying to remain as the major power center. India has a tough task to remain calm and firm in the face of this massive turmoil in the region.



**Taliban's Rule of Law! A photograph by RAWA  
(Revolutionary Association of Women of  
Afghanistan - Courtesy: Wikipedia)**

We must see clearly that in this situation Pakistan civil government's hand must be strengthened so that it can deal effectively against the army highhandedness and terrorist nuisance in the region. One also must make it clear that what Taliban is doing has nothing to do with Islamic teachings as such. As per Islam, there can't be force or compulsion in matters of religion. To force somebody to convert by force is not acceptable as per Islamic teachings. Also to kill the innocent people also goes against teachings of Koran.

As far a Jizya is concerned it was a tax levied on non Muslims in Muslim rule. This was in lieu of exemption from military duties and was a small proportion of the

income of the person. It was mostly lesser than the Zakat, which is mandatory in Islam. Today to talk of Jizya is a political abuse of worst order; those using this language need to be restrained in the democratic society. The million rupee question remains, will civilian rule prevail over the fissiparous forces operating within Pakistan. Indian Government must take up the issue of protection of minorities in Pakistan without any compromise.

*Dr Ram Puniyani is a professor in  
Biomedical Engineering & Biotechnology  
at the Indian Institute of Technology,  
Mumbai*

**All religions are founded on blood, for all, as is known, rest  
essentially on the idea of sacrifice – that is, on the perpetual  
immolation of humanity to the insatiable vengeance of divinity.  
In this blood mystery, man is always the victim, and the priest  
– a man also, but one privileged by grace – is the divine  
executioner.**

**Michael Bakunin**

*Federalism, Socialism, and Anti-Theologism (1867)*



# From the President of FIRA

Narendra Nayak

After returning home from a hectic though satisfying tour of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, it is time for a quick recap. In Maharashtra we had a training program at Mahad organised by our able newly joined member of FIRA executive committee, Pravin Gangurde. He is the director of the Ambedkar Center at Mahad and within two months of joining us organised a three day training program for MSW students at his center. Hats off to him for his enthusiasm and for giving Somu and me an opportunity to interact with nearly forty young, enthusiastic students. We had great time with them exchanging ideas and learning the techniques of the so called godmen and those with alleged supernatural powers. Some of the participants were so fired with zeal that they discarded the threads signifying superstitious beliefs tied round their wrists and the amulets around their necks! One young man wanted me to cut it off with my own hands! Though it looked too much like tokenism, I did it out of love for the boy who had the courage to throw away the religious symbols tied by his parents! All the participants were Daliths and some of them had come from as far away as 600 kms at their own expense!

From there it was to Mumbai but not before having a two hour interaction with the local students who had many questions and experiences to narrate. At this Ambdekar College there were very good teachers who encouraged their students to question. From Mumbai I went to Itarsi and spent two days there among the tribals at Khesla and nearby areas. The interactions went on well and on the



second day we had three trainees with us who had been trained in June, 2009. On the next day we went to Bhopal where we had a two hour interaction with students of a state level school for SC students. This whole program was conducted by Rajesh Parashar, Malliaha and their group. They are teachers in tribal schools and take great interest in educating their students in the real sense of the word! The same evening I started for Indore and reached at night. At Indore an organisation called as Deen Bandhu had fixed a five day training program at an ashram called as Visarjan Ashram. There were around forty constant participants and about ten to twenty casual ones who went and came as they pleased. There were some christian nuns too! The levels of interaction were excellent and I am sure that at least some of them will be taking up the task of creating scientific temper among the people. The local organiser was Anand and his friend Sanjay both of whom are faculty members at a local college of social work. All the trainees were under graduate, post graduate or research students in the social work departments of the local colleges. I returned to Mangalore via Mumbai.

In the second week of February a 'miracle' had been reported at Kayankulam in Kerala. A flex print of Mary had been reportedly shedding tears. Usually it were the statues which would 'weep'. But, in keeping up with the changing technologies, the miracles too seem to change. We were not very confident of being allowed to check the 'miracle'. However, Anil Kumar of Kerala Yuktivade Sangham had written to the Bishop asking for the permission for the same. We have been pleasantly surprised that the permission has been granted! We are planning to do that and try to find out how that was done. Well, it is said the imitation is the best form of flattery! So, we are going to demonstrate the same 'miracle' with the flex print of Premanand shedding tears!

We of the movement are used to being targeted by all sorts of fundamentalists. This time it was the Muslim fundamentalism that did that. In Andhra there have been protests over a book published by Krantikar. It was not only he who was arrested but also Inniah, Subba Rao who were supposed to be keeping stocks of the same book for sale. Similar events have taken place in Karnataka but the targets have been some newspapers who have not been known for their progressive stand! It is strange that people have discovered the translations of articles by Taslima Nasreen which are available freely on the internet to be offensive. FIRA has taken up the cause of these three and Babu has been keeping us advised about the action being taken up. It is important that they come out on bail and then we call for a greater debate on the issue of fundamental rights and so called religious sentiments.

All of us will be happy to note that plans are afoot to make a full length feature film based loosely on the work done by Premanand. The script is under way and the plans are being made to make it a commercially viable proposition too, which would naturally mean addition of some events which would not have happened in

his life! I have been asked to provide technical consultancy for the same and I have gladly accepted.

I am sure that in this year we will be having a lot of progress and consolidation. In Karnataka, a state level rationalist federation is being planned and the meeting is at Bangalore on the 14th March. It is very much needed to have such federations for proper representation of our point of view and investigating paranormal phenomena as soon as they are reported.

Our battles against the godmen have received a boost thanks to the exposure of two of them at Delhi and Bangalore. Their sexual escapades have stirred the imagination of people who have rebelled against them. The scandals have rocked the nation once more, but as it is said the public memory is very short. In the past few years a number of such sleazy characters have been exposed but the show goes on! As the brain washed devotees would say- it is the others who are bad, our guru is not so! The devotees of the exposed god men have been quick to defend their gurus claiming that the whole thing is a frame up. While an individual's sex life is his/her private affair, the shenanigans of those who claim to be celibate and have been preaching to the world at large about it should live up to their preachings. People who worship such individuals should realise that.

FIRA shall continue its work in investigating and exposing such frauds and continue to create scientific temper among our people. The movement seems to be reaching a critical mass and as that happens the progress will be rapid and breath taking. The million dollar question always looms large before us- are we prepared to take on these challenges? It is for us to decide and get going!

**BS**

**Prof Narendra Nayak is the President of  
Federation of Indian Rationalist  
Associations**

# Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha

(Bangalore Rationalist Association)

**Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha** conducts monthly lectures and discussions on various topics. Those who are interested in attending the programmes conducted by the association may contact:

**Dr. M.N.Keshava Rao** (Phone: 26690269. Email: keshava\_rao@hotmail.com)

**A.S.Nataraj** (Phone: 26696553. Email: rajsri@bgl.vsnl.net.in)

**BVV Subba Rao** (Phone: 09886679088)

# Tools for Skeptical Thinking

## Carl Sagan

Carl Sagan's famous essay, *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*, more or less encapsulates the basic tenets of Skeptical Thinking. The present article is an extract from the essay.

The full text can be found in one of Sagan's best-sellers *The Demonhaunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."

- Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.

- Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.

- Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.

- Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a way station in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.



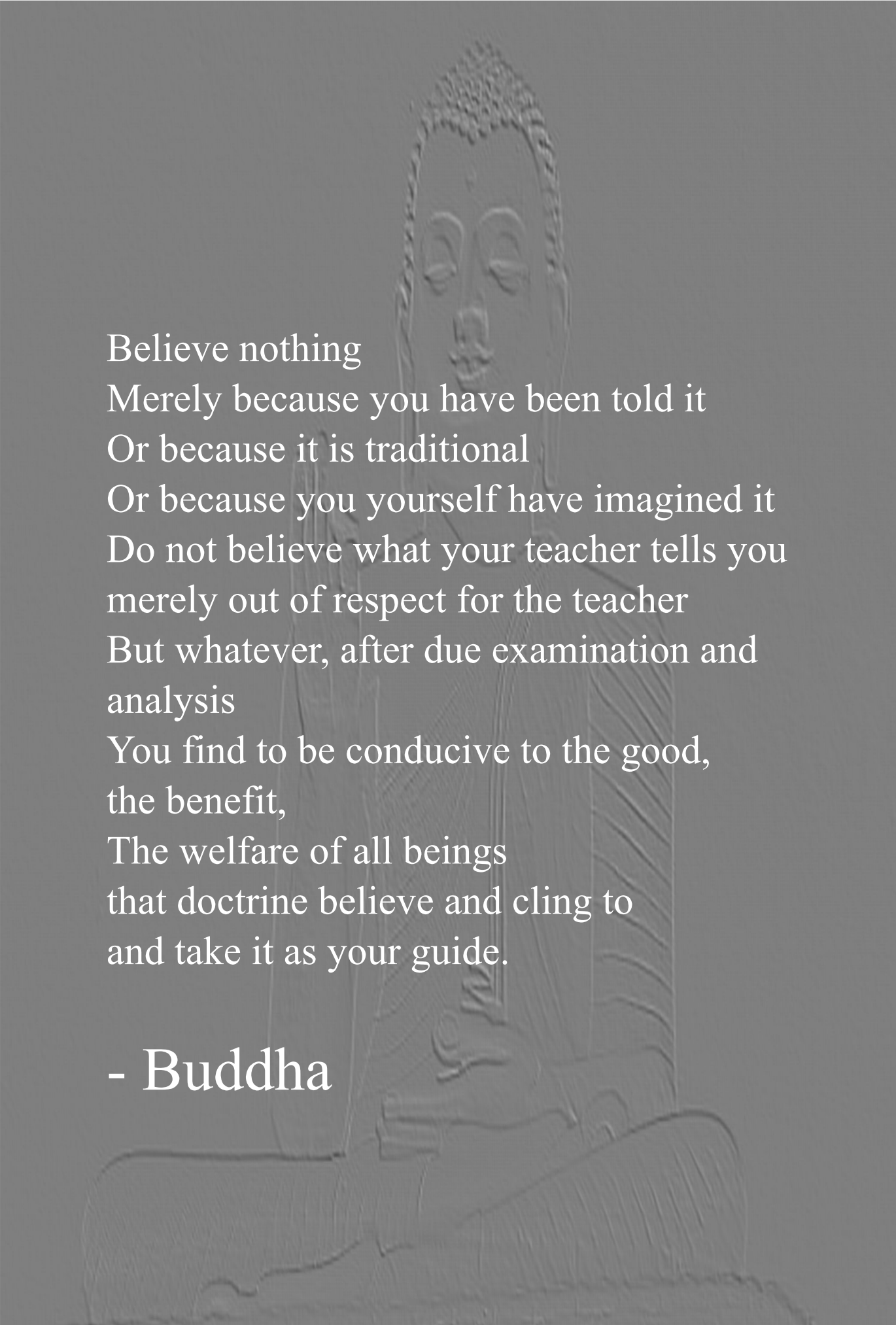
- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are obliged to confront, but finding them is more challenging.

- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise) —not just most of them.

- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler.

- Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable, unfalsifiable are not worth much. You must be able to check assertions out. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.





Believe nothing  
Merely because you have been told it  
Or because it is traditional  
Or because you yourself have imagined it  
Do not believe what your teacher tells you  
merely out of respect for the teacher  
But whatever, after due examination and  
analysis  
You find to be conducive to the good,  
the benefit,  
The welfare of all beings  
that doctrine believe and cling to  
and take it as your guide.

- Buddha